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ABSTRACT

An ongoing study for the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, conducted by Alan Purves, Sarah Jordan and others aims to identify the problems and challenges facing teachers and students of culturally diverse texts. It is also trying to determine how best to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum, grades 7 through 12. Secondarily, the project documents some of the solutions teachers and students have come up with. The first part of the study consists of two phases: (1) interviews with teachers and students from schools ranging in socio-economic makeup, size and geographical location to determine what they have been reading both in and outside of class; (2) a multiple choice test asking students to read and respond to multicultural texts. Results have shown that multicultural texts occupy a very minimal place in most curriculums, and that students do not generally read for cultural information. In some cases, in fact, they resist multicultural texts. When they like the texts, it is because they have a good ending or the story elicits their sympathy for the characters. The focus of the research in the third and fourth years concerns the ways in which multicultural texts can be taught. The researchers suggest that curriculums should include the teaching of cultural responses as well as cultural literatures. Students should be helped to be made aware of the diversity of texts and approaches to texts in this society. (TB)

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National Research Center on Literature Teaching & Learning

Literature UPDATE

Fall 1994

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Literature and Multiculturalism: The challenge of teaching and learning about the literature of diverse cultures.

By Steven Ostrowski

Why are so many teachers throughout the United States focusing on the study of culturally diverse texts in the language arts classroom? What problems do teachers who attempt to expose their students to these texts face? How do students respond to texts written by and about people from cultures sometimes very different from their own?

These are some of the questions being asked in a major ongoing study for the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning being conducted by Alan Purves, Sarah Jordan, and others at the University at Albany. "Teachers as well as researchers know that the answers to these questions will not be easy to come by," said Purves, "because, for one thing, teaching philosophies change according to the contexts in which the teacher is teaching." Jordan quoted one of the teachers in the study as saying, "Here in Hawaii, multicultural means dead white males." Not all administrators, or parents, or, for that matter, teachers, are open to the idea of students learning multicultural literature. Nevertheless, the answers to the questions that this study is asking have important pedagogical, as well as social, ramifications in an increasingly culturally diverse United States.

Focusing primarily on junior high and secondary schools, the study is a multifaceted attempt to lay the groundwork for a Language Arts curriculum that emphasizes cultural diversity.

According to educator Diane Ravitch, one of the major issues in literature education today involves the relation of multiculturalism to the general goals of teaching critical thinking in and through literature. When the transitions of various cultural minorities into the mainstream of American society and education are considered, the issue becomes particularly prominent. For one thing, a general approach to literature education "for all" may serve to undermine the existing cultures of the society and move our society willy-nilly into a standardization without cultural identity. At the same time there is the concern that over-emphasis on the particular culture from which the students come will foster separatism and even racism. Either extreme can lead to strife both within the schools and without, as has been seen in various societies around the world.

"There is a real *need* here," Purves and Jordan report from preliminary studies. "We need to teach students about the so-called *other* in order to legitimize the cultures of both worlds. We need to institutionalize the literature of the *other*, because that's how we legitimize it."

Recognizing the need to expose students to the rich variety of cultural backgrounds from which they and their peers come, and that these various cultures must be able to coexist if the nation is to survive and thrive, many teachers and some administrators have called for greater emphasis in the curriculum on multicultural studies. This call has been sounded particularly loudly among teachers of the Language Arts.

However, the multicultural study is bearing out that a multitude of problems arise with such a call. For instance, many well-intentioned Language Arts teachers are not familiar with literature from di-

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Literature and Multiculturalism:

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verse cultures. Most received educations in which multicultural awareness was not emphasized. Some feel adrift, wanting to learn more—wanting, for instance, to read nonstereotypical yet appropriate texts—but not sure where to go for the information. And of course, the "extra" time needed for teachers to familiarize themselves with the literature of, as well as background information about, new cultures is a commodity notoriously lacking for most Language Arts teachers.

Another problem is that many schools, saddled with prohibitive budgets, are not well-equipped with multicultural texts. And even in cases where money is available, there is sometimes a lack of knowledge on the administrative as well as the departmental level about how to choose appropriate texts. What is more, many of the newer multicultural anthologies are so big that one school actually reported tearing the books in half so that students could transport and use them.

As Alan Purves has found in previous studies involving multi-national responses to literature, many students are not receptive to the literature of cultures other than their own. (This is above and beyond the general problem that many students are not receptive to the literature of even their own cultures.) Students often do not understand the mores and customs of the culture of the "other." A related, and not uncommon response to the multicultural stories and poems read by students in the present study was that the works were "irrelevant" or "boring." Students often questioned why they needed to read about people with whom they felt they had nothing in common.

But culture and cultural differences are not even conscious issues for the majority of the students. Said Dr. Purves: "The incoming results suggest that students don't take a cultural perspective when they respond to literature. They see the text as a reading comprehension problem." This is more true, according to Purves, of American students than of students from other cultures. Why? "Because we're *driven* to teach reading and not to teach literature." Much of Purves' work has been dedicated to just that issue: how to teach *literature* to students.

The chief aim of the multicultural study was to identify the problems and challenges facing teachers and students of culturally diverse texts, as well as to identify how best to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum, grades seven through twelve. But an important secondary aim involves identifying some of the solutions teachers and students have come up with. Ms. Jordan, who will be heading a multicultural roundtable at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Orlando, Florida, in November, said, "Through this project, in various ways, we want to facilitate communication among teachers, so that they can share their successes and frustrations and resources with one another. The teachers we're working with are very committed to multiculturalism; and they recognize the importance of our project, but a number of them are frankly asking for some help. And we feel the best help they can receive is from one another. Because some of them are doing exciting and innovative things that they report are getting through to the students." It was with all of these aims that the Multicultural Project began in 1991.

Years One and Two: Interviewing for Issues

The first part of the project involved a conference of authors, scholars and teachers, which resulted in the volume *Multicultural Literacy and Literature*, edited by Suzanne Miller & Barbara McCaskill. At the same time the Center conducted a pilot study consisting of in-depth interviews with high school students of various ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Native American, Hispanic American, and Anglo American. Interviews were also conducted with teachers in these schools. The schools are located in a range of socio-economic settings, urban and rural.

Some of the questions which motivated the researchers included, *What problems seem endemic to readers when they read texts from a culture other than their own*? and, *Do readers' criteria for judging works differ when the works are outside their culture?*

The interviews had two phases. The first phase included asking students questions primarily related their personal as well as school reading and viewing habits and interests. The second phase of the interview required that the students read selections of specially chosen multicultural literature and answer questions about the selections.

Teachers were also interviewed about the kinds of texts they were using and typical problems they encountered. The researchers found that there wasn't much multicultural literature being taught in many schools, and more often than not, what was being taught represented what the team has called "a token nod." "Multiculturalism, we found, was not particularly supported by districts. And the one multicultural text in the typical syllabus might be, say, a 'white' version of multicultural literature. For example, the standard literature where the black person is the victim. Very stereotypical."

In general, the main purposes of this initial phase of the study were 1) to determine something of the range of response differences among the students and compare that range with that found in prior studies, 2) to validate the content coding system, and 3) to see what additions or changes needed to be made in order to capture the cultural differences of the readers' responses. The product of the pilot study was a detailed report called "Issues in the Responses of Students to Culturally Diverse Texts: A Preliminary Study," concerning the classification scheme and the initial description of similarities and differences among cultural groups.

In the second phase of the study, researchers issued both a multiple choice and written survey to students from schools around the county which were specifically targeted for their ethnic populations. Both surveys asked students to read multicultural stories and poems and to respond to them. A statistical analysis is currently being performed on the short answer surveys by Shouming Li, of the University at Albany.

The coding of the written answers is almost complete. In addition to the preliminary finding that students tend not to read for cultural information, the researchers also note a frequency of responses that seem quite hostile. "This is garbage." "Nobody tells me what I have to read."

"Students tend to fall apart when they're confronted with unfamiliar material," Dr. Purves noted. "It has to do with a lack of background information." Sarah Jordan speculated that responses of this type may represent defensive postures on the part of students who simply don't comprehend much of what they're reading.

When the students did like a piece, usually it was because they felt it "had a good story line," or a "neat ending," or "because it didn't use words that I don't understand." Although not altogether absent, responses of approval of a piece based

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on cultural information was relatively rare. An example might be "The story really made you feel sorry for the slaves. I mean, how could anybody treat anybody that way?"

Years Three and Four: Teachers as Experimenters and Pioneers

The focus of the research in the third and fourth years of the study is on the teachers. Participant teachers come from high schools in New York, New Jersey, Kansas, Montana, California, and Hawaii. "We're doing this study with teachers," says Alan Purves, "because teachers are in the best position to answer the questions we're asking. We don't know the answers. The teachers are the true experimenters and the true pioneers."

Since the evidence mounting from the first and second years of the study suggests that students from one culture have difficulty apprehending texts written in and enjoyed by another culture, and that they fail to see them in the way preferred by the other culture, the issue becomes one of devising pedagogical strategies to enable students better to understand their own culture and that of others.

This can be accomplished, according to the researchers, through the teaching of divergent cultural *responses* as well as divergent cultural literatures. The approach of pluralism means that students are helped *to be made aware* of the diversity of texts and approaches to texts in our society. Such understanding should form a part of the curriculum, for it should strengthen the transition from cultural isolation to cultural diversity. It also shifts the focus in the classroom from concerns of reading to more explicit cultural and literary concerns.

The function of this third phase of the study is to explore with teachers the best ways for them to analyze and describe their students' response patterns and to make appropriate lessons so as to enable their students to understand the ways by which other cultures' texts and readers apprehend the world. One result will be a series of case studies of teaching practices and student perceptions.

So far, the researchers have gathered information from the teachers in the study primarily through periodic telephone conversations and written correspondence. Site coordinators in each state help to facilitate some of these correspondences as well as visit the sites for observations. Arrangements are currently being made by Kate Blossom, Assistant Director and Outreach Coordinator at the Center, for many of the teachers to receive LitNet accounts, which will allow the researchers and the teachers to exchange information and ideas much more efficiently and thoroughly. Unfortunately, not all of the schools the teachers work in have modems—or teachers don't have access to them—so, at least for the time being, those teachers will not be able to avail themselves of this valuable resource.

The information the researchers are gathering suggests that in some schools at least, things are going quite well. In these schools, teachers report very good results teaching what for some of them amount to "experimental courses." In these classes, the culture, the literature, and the students' *responses* to the culture and the literature are all being carefully explored.

But other teachers' initial reports are not as positive. In addition to problems of finding and reading appropriate texts, as well as the time to learn background information about other cultures, some teachers report resistance in their efforts from administrators, parents and students. This kind of resistance can create major hurdles to the goal of a more multicultural curriculum.

Toward a Multicultural Curriculum

Already in their on-going study, Purves and the research team have uncovered a wealth of information about what is happening, what isn't happening and what can happen in a multicultural-focused Language Arts classroom. As the data continue to come in and is further analyzed and disseminated, and as teachers continue to share with researchers and each other their multicultural trials, tribulations and triumphs, the goal of a truly multicultural Language Arts curriculum that contributes to students' understanding of themselves and their culturally diverse classmates moves closer to realization.

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